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ABSTRACT

As a response to the increasing support for linking information about the role of writing in the lives of children to writing instruction in schools, a research instrument was developed that illuminates children's concepts about writing (who writes, what is written, where people write, why they write, and how they view the writing process). Construction of the instrument involved five phases: (1) finding community settings in which writing is participated in or observed by children; (2) analyzing the different functions of writing in the community; (3) creating semi-scripted writing vignettes depicting the different writing functions; (4) videotaping the vignettes; and (5) composing interview questions based on the videotapes that probe children's concepts. Sixty midwestern public school children, from kindergarten, fourth, and sixth grades, were shown sequences of the videotape and then interviewed. Results indicated that children at all grade levels described a wide range of writing functions and placed value on writing. A detailed description of the results of the data analysis is being prepared in a separate paper. Data obtained from the study is being used to build a developmental model of children's concepts about writing functions. (ARH)

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Probing Children's Concepts of Writing Functions:

A Developmental Research Instrument

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Probing Children's Concepts of Writing Functions: A Developmental Research Instrument

There is abundant and increasing support for linking information about the role of writing in the lives of children to writing instruction in schools (Chorny, 1984; Heath, 1981, 1983; Hymes, 1982; Smith, 1982; Whiteman, 1980). Yet a developmental model of children's understanding of writing functions remains uncharted. Examining the place writing holds in students' lives can lead to understanding students as writers and suggest implications for the ways writing instruction can be improved. This approach would be consistent with Shuy's (1981) advocacy of a holistic approach to learning language skills in which "function always precedes form" (p. 103).

Recent ethnographic studies have begun to focus on understanding the nature and functions of writing in diverse cultural settings (Heath, 1983; Schieffelin, 1982; Weinstein, 1982; Scribner and Cole, 1978; Smith, 1982). Other studies are investigating the functions of writing in classrooms (Florio and Clark, 1982; Hymes, 1981). Yet, as Florio and Clark (1982) point out, little is known about the role writing plays in the lives of children inside and outside the school. In addition, virtually nothing is known about students' attitudes toward the function of writing (Goswami, 1978).

In 1985 the National Council of Teachers of English Research Foundation awarded funds to explore children's concepts of writing functions. The project involved the development of an innovative research instrument used to illuminate children's concepts about writing in regard to who writes, what is written, where people write, why they write, and how they view the writing process. In designing this instrument, the researchers employed ethnographic methods to develop videotaped sequences of community writing situations typically participated in or observed by children. These sequences were used

in a structured interview setting with 60 children at various levels of development. The results of these interviews yielded a rich source of data reflective of children's knowledge of writing functions. This data comprises the initial pool of information necessary to build a developmental model of children's understanding of writing functions. Subsequent research has already been funded toward accomplishment of this goal.

The purposes of this paper are to 1) describe the construction of the research instrument and 2) highlight the potential of the instrument for generating a developmental model of children's concepts of writing functions.

The research materials consisted of videotaped sequences depicting people engaged in naturally occurring writing instances in a variety of community settings. The construction of the instrument had five phases: participant observation in the community, analysis of the data collected in the field, determination of writing instances to be videotaped, the actual videotaping of the naturally occurring writing instances, and the writing of interview questions to correspond to the videotapes.

Finding Writing in the Community

From the limitless possibilities of community settings, the researcher was only concerned with those settings in which writing may occur in the presence of children. Home and classroom settings were not included here. Rather, the researcher focused on settings in the community where children frequent and in which writing may occur in their presence. It was the researcher's intent for the subjects to easily identify with the community settings in order to maximize their ability to address the area of writing.

Some of these settings had been identified by the researcher in a previous study (Sanders, Freeman, Samuelson, 1985).

The researcher functioned as a participant observer in a variety of settings over a two month period to collect data on: 1) Who writes? 2) What do they write? 3) Why do they seem to write? 4) Where do they write? 5) What purposes seem to be served by their writing? and 6) What reactions do people exhibit toward their writing? Writing was defined as that which an individual was doing with paper and pencil/pen/marker. Thus, writing or word processing produced at a computer was not investigated. The observed sites included: gas station, medical clinic, pediatrician's office, shopping mall, retail stores, bank, discount department store, major department store, elementary school office, post office, library, restaurant. Observations were documented through extensive field notes (Spradley, 1980), interviews with persons involved in the writing, and the collection of artifacts when appropriate. Several sites were visited on more than one occasion.

Analyzing the Data

Data collected in the participant observations were analyzed in a descriptive manner to avoid *a priori* categories from being imposed. A domain analysis (Spradley, 1980) of data collected in the field was conducted in order to develop representative data categories. These categories reflected information concerning participants, setting, and writing functions. Data dealing with functions was further analyzed in comparison to the functions of writing in community settings documented in an earlier study (Sanders, Freeman, Samuelson, 1985).

This comparative analysis of writing functions resulted in writing situations being assigned to categories such as self-directed writing, writing directed by an authority, interpersonal communication, writing for one's self, commercial transactions, and writing to gain access to services. Writing events occurring within a single observation could be coded in more than one category. For example, a person in the post office writing a letter which was sealed in an envelope and mailed immediately as express mail, was coded as an instance of self-directed writing and interpersonal communication.

Writing situations were sequentially analyzed in order to define single writing events within the context of each situation. For example, a writing situation in a toy store involved a clerk's action of writing information on a charge slip which she then passed to a customer. The customer, in turn, signed her name on the charge slip. Each of these actions was marked as a distinct event.

The analysis team included the principal investigator who conducted and documented participant observations in the field and two consulting researchers who responded to the investigators' fieldnotes and verbal descriptions. All involved shared familiarity with community writing functions. It was necessary to explicate fieldnotes and clarify these explanations in order to combine views of participant observer and reactor to observations. Interaction among the analysis team members allowed for expansion of ideas which avoided the nearsightedness that may plague researchers when they analyze descriptive data independently.

Creating the Writing Vignettes

The resulting array of documented writing functions was used to define possible vignettes for videotaping. The primary basis for selecting a writing event for taping was based on a match between the event and the types of writing functions that were likely to be observed by children in community settings. Other issues, however, also needed to be taken into consideration. For example, it was desirable to avoid vignettes that reflected sex role stereotypes. However, observation of community settings indicated that the school secretary was female and that the pediatrician was male. These situations were selected despite the fact that they portray writers in stereotypic sex roles.

Physical constraints of certain writing environments, for example, writing surfaces that were far above or behind a child's visual purview, excluded settings from videotaping. Willingness of people and businesses in the community to participate in videotaping also had to be considered in the selection process. Realistic integrity of each selected vignette and the array of functions within the collection of vignettes were nonetheless maintained.

The six sites selected were: restaurant, pediatrician's office, public library, toy store in a mall, post office, and elementary school office. Each situation selected will be discussed individually. The restaurant setting was chosen since this is a familiar context for children. A popular family restaurant with counters and booths which served both food and ice cream specialties was selected. The situation involved a female waitress taking an order from a female child and her mother. This face to face communication

was an essential part of the waitress's role; she needed to write down something as part of her job responsibility. Therefore, writing was an integral part of her work. In this situation, the source of the message was generated by the participants in the interaction.

Writing something from another written source was exemplified in the library where students were observed doing their homework. It was decided that two males, elementary aged, would be featured in a library vignette. The boys were doing their homework which also highlighted the connection between reading and writing.

A third type of writing involved a business transaction and the importance of one's signature in completing or making official such a transaction. The scene in the toy store of a customer buying a toy with a credit card was selected. The writer here was the customer signing her name. The sales person was female and it was decided that the customer would be female also.

A fourth type of writing, the self-generated aspect of writing where the source for the writing comes from within the individual, was observed in the post office. During this observation, a number of children were also in the post office where they could observe the writer. Since it is common for children to accompany a parent on errands to the post office, this site was selected. An adult male was doing the writing.

Probably the most familiar community setting for a child is the elementary school office. Observations of the school secretary had yielded many possible situations. The taking of a phone message was selected since this is such an important and frequent act in our society. The school secretary was female.

Another community setting frequented by children is the doctor's office. In this context, the prescription provides a unique kind of writing for its message is written by someone, given to another individual who then must carry it to a third individual for its meaning to be realized. Without the written prescription, the patient could not receive medicine. The videotaped situation involved a male pediatrician writing a prescription.

Each vignette was focused to enable the child's attention to be directed to writing. In order to avoid any confusion on the part of the subjects, only one person writes in each vignette.

Videotaping the Vignettes

After the data from the field observations was analyzed and the sites selected, the advice of a technical consultant who would actually tape the vignettes was sought. The consultant, who is associated with the Teacher Education Laboratory at Ohio State University, pointed out that a decision needed to be made regarding the format of the tapes: should they be pure documentary style or semi-scripted?

Cogent arguments were presented by the consultant in favor of the semi-scripted format. In the documentary style, the writing instance would be very short. Background activities might detract the child's attention from the writing situation itself to other aspects of the context. The advantages of the semi-scripted approach were many. The situation would still be naturally occurring, based on the observations conducted by the researcher. But repeated taping of the same situation would allow for close ups, subjective as well as objective angles of the writing act, and the possibility of editing to insure a vignette of high technical quality. On the practical

advantage, the semi-scripted approach would guarantee that participants knew when videotaping would occur and other participants could be included as needed. For instance, in the restaurant, customers were provided for the waitress. In addition, the ability to edit the footage would provide a vignette similar to what is seen on television which appears more natural to the young child than the pure documentary. The decision was made to use a semi-scripted approach. Six vignettes were scripted as described above. At each site the entire naturally occurring writing situation was taped first. Then participants were asked to reenact various parts of the situation. Close-up shots were taped as well as shots from objective and subjective angles. An effort was made not to disrupt the normal functioning of the site.

Each videotaped sequence was edited into a one minute vignette which begins by establishing the setting and creating a meaningful context for the writing act. Then the writing act is shown in close-ups from both objective and subjective angles. In addition to the dialogue corresponding to the writing act, natural background noises are also included.

Writing Interview Questions

The interview procedure was a series of open-ended questions to which there are no prescribed or predetermined answers. Each subject viewed three of the six vignettes, selected in random order. Following the viewing of each vignette, the subject responded to the following open-ended questions:

1. What did we just see? Tell me what you saw in the videotape.
2. Who is writing?
3. What do you think they are writing?
4. Where are they writing?
5. Why are they writing?
6. What would happen if they didn't write it down?
7. What will happen to the writing next?

After viewing all three tapes, the subject responded to summary questions: 1) Why do people write? 2) What would happen if people didn't write?

These questions served as a structured guide. Additional questions emerged in response to each subject's comments. The questions were pilot tested with seven children to enable refinements and alternate wordings before actual subjects were interviewed.

Probing Children's Concepts

Sixty children in grades K, 2, and 4 were individually interviewed by the researcher. All the children attended a public school located in a small midwestern community. Each child responded to three of the videotaped sequences in a tape recorded interview. A total of 180 protocols were analyzed. The instrument proved to be an effective means of eliciting children's concepts regarding the functions of writing in the community. Of the 180 protocols, there were only 5 instances in which children failed to recognize that writing had occurred. In only 8 of 180 instances did children respond that they did not know why people were writing.

Children at all grade levels described a wide range of writing functions and revealed that they placed value on writing. The primary categories of writing functions included remembering, communicating with others, learning, and expressing individuality. As children got older, they were able to describe greater diversity in the writing functions. In addition, they identified one writing act as reflecting more than one function. For example, when the waitress wrote the order, this writing served as a memory aid as well as a means of communicating information to someone else.

The value children attributed to writing was revealed in their responses. For example, a kindergartener reported that if the person in the tape "did not write he wouldn't learn how to read." A second grader noted that if the physician did not write "maybe she (the mother) would forget and buy the wrong medicine and the baby would be sicker." A fourth grade subject stated that "if people didn't write, like in the diary, they'll always have that feeling piled up and it's probably not good for you to have feelings piled up."

Children at all grade levels indicated that writers need a sense of audience. They recognized that writing is read by someone else or reread by the writer.

A detailed description of the results of the data analysis is being prepared in a separate paper. The data from these interviews, coupled with research in progress, is being used to build a developmental model of children's concepts about writing functions.

The research instrument described in this paper reflects writing in the real world from the perspective of children while enabling the researcher to focus the attention of young subjects on a specified set of naturalistic writing events developed through an extensive field based study. Thus, this instrument is unique. It has potential as an efficient and productive tool for conducting writing research with children across developmental levels.

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